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THE LOCK OF GREY HAIR.

By ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

It hung so conspicuously there amid the surrounding mop of fine dark hair that it piqued the curiosity of Dr. Blane's friends more than any other detail of his very distinguished appearance. Grief, said a good number, had caused it; anxiety, declared others; but the majority, including servants and women, plumped of course for love. He was successful, and he was unmarried; the evidence was unanswerable. I believe, however, that I am the only living person who holds the true secret.

"Most people who have really lived," he used to say, "possess some singular experience or other that they do not care about telling indiscriminately. And this is mine. I'm a little ashamed of it," he added, "for nowadays we explain everything, or confess ourselves unscientific. Besides"—he shrugged his shoulders—"my conduct, I always feel, was not strictly professional perhaps in the best sense. And, also, it was the only time in my life when I was obliged to acknowledge a sense of unreasoning fear—and yield to it."

And the story, it must be confessed, certainly would have claimed belief more readily in those picturesque times when "Possession," diabolical or otherwise, was a prevalent superstition, and when the post mortem activity of a disembodied spirit was held to be often accordingly lively.

It happened before the days when Dr. Blane's skill had earned for him the honours of knighthood, together with the privilege of Inspectorship of Royal diseases. This, somewhat, is as he told it to me shortly before his own death—

With an intimate friend, it appears, he was revisiting a little village in the Swiss Jura, where he had been to learn French as a boy, when the friend intentionally was laid low with diphtheria, and he stayed out perforce to nurse him. Both men had their meals in the cosy little Pension de La Poste, where twenty years before they had studied, grammar and irregular verbs together; but Dr. Blane, who wanted quiet, had his work and bed room in Michaud's new house at the other end of the village, where the vineyards begin.

Now, the epidemic, it so happened, was a severe one, and two other persons—but for whom this thing might not have come about—were also laid low—one, the village mesdaquin, Dr. Ducommun, the other Mlle. Udriet, a wealthy but avaricious old woman, whose personality was of dark and sinister odour throughout the whole countryside, and who, on account of her intense miserliness, was known generally as "la maison riche." And she was well named, for the village wit has a way of hitting the nail on the head. She was an evil woman, with great force of individuality, dreaded by all; and her fear of spending money went to amazing lengths. It was even reported of her that she enticed her neighbours' cats into her big house, alive and cooked them with her own hands, and ate them to save a butcher's bill. Her long finger nails and certain other unappetising peculiarities were evidence, the village held, for anything and everything.

And Dr. Blane, who was sent for to prescribe in the temporary absence of Dr. Ducommun, admits that the moment he crossed the threshold of this dismantling room and saw the old miser staring steadily at him from her bed he was inspired by an instant and singularly powerful aversion for her. Her face he always described as truly venomous, and her thin fingers, lying on the coverlet, were "curved and beautiful" he used to declare with a shuddering laugh, "like the feet of a great bird of prey." Here for the first time in his life, was a patient he hated afterwards, whom he would rather have helped to die than to live.

Though ashamed of his revulsion, he could not quite control it. The fact that she would never pay his fee was nothing. It was the woman herself. She was like some great loathsome insect in that dark room, he said; some monster whose sting was death.

The situation at first was merely unpleasant, but a little later it became more awkward and furnished Dr. Blane with the excuse for what he terms his unprofessional attitude. For the village doctor got better—well enough to crawl out and see his pet patients—and a measure of relief steadily ensued. Moreover, the man's eye according for Dr. Blane because she preferred his greater skill, and Dr. Blane as often as possible shirked the unpleasant responsibility upon the shoulders of the local practitioner.

Plainly put, he avoided seeing her, even professed pain, thank to dodge, until the old woman, who she found that he no longer came, suffered paroxysms of rage from the military neighbourhood. So, one evening, he

It was one to go, for on the end of March when the snow came to a climax. Raining on the evening Mlle. Udriet, apparently in a crisis, had sent him an imperious summons, and Dr. Blane, not without pride of conscience, had passed on the summons by messenger to his colleague at the other end of the village. Dr. Ducommun, however, was detained for several hours, with the unfortunate result that a most valuable rich life perished in the end.

The Englishman, of course, knew nothing of this. He was in the Pension sitting by the bedside of his friend, reading. It was ten o'clock. Shaded candles stood on the little table and the sick man was sleeping peacefully the sleep of recovery. For twenty four hours there had been no return of the delirium. At last well on the darkened room Mme. Favre, who owned the Pension, and had proved herself a devoted nurse, was in the act of mixing a tumbler of Tisane, tisermain—her invariable remedy for all complaints—when suddenly two things—two strange things—happened simultaneously: the invalid man sat bolt upright in bed with startling abruptness, stared blankly into the dim room in front of him, and pointed; while Mme. Favre let fall her tumbler with a crash upon the floor and cried out a voice of genuine alarm. "Who is it? Some body pushed past me! There's someone else in the room!"

The singular was these two persons acted on the same instant impressed Dr. Blane unpleasantly—ironically. He was conscious at once of a disagreeable thrill—of something that brought the water with a rush to his eyes and made the skin of his back crawl. Yet, of course, he never for one moment believed that anyone had really entered the room through locked doors.

A return of the delirium, he said quietly, as his friend continued to glare about him and to point. And then added more sternly. There's no need for alarm, Mme. Favre, I assure you!" for the old lady was leaning, pale and terrified, against the cupboard, and staring towards the bed as though her eyes would drop out.

But the patient, of course, absorbed his immediate attention. To the doctor there could be nothing very unusual about a scene of delirium; yet about this particular scene of delirium, he became sharply and unpleasantly aware, there was something very unusual indeed. It was compiling and horribly real. To begin with, though the sick man had forgotten his French almost to the simplest phrases, he was now gabbling the language with a speed and fluency that were positively uncanny; and at the same time with a vehemence, a passion, a fury that had characterised none of his former attacks; moreover—most disturbing of all—with a tone, whispering voice that was beyond question not his own.

But of the whole wild torrent, all, and each, for that matter all Mme. Favre, could catch before it subsided into a confused silence were the short phrases, uttered with eyes fixed upon the door, and hand pointed in his very face: "You passed me! . . . But now I am out—and I shall not pass you by!"

The singular thing, however—and it was this that gave the good woman the cries de nerfs that ended in a fainting fit—the singular and horrible thing was that as the changed voice poured out of the sick man, his face altered visibly as well, altered too into the likeness of another, of visage that they both knew. How the eyes and mouth of a man could slip into the strange likeness of another—an evil, vindictive woman—is beyond the power of description, yet the calm, experienced Dr. Blane as well as the frightened old lady at the end of the room both recognised beyond possibility of discussion that voice, face, and manner belonged to the evil, foul soul of that perverted old woman, la maisonne riche. In the eyes, perhaps, the resemblance was least. It was unmistakable. It was wholly impressive.

Then it all passed as quickly as it came. The sick man slept peacefully once more. Mme. Favre pulled herself together, assisted by the judicious aid of cold water, and half an hour later Dr. Blane, bathing already with relief the sensations of alarm such as he had never known before in his life, left the Pension to go back to his own rooms.

His shortest way lay down the village street, past the house of Mlle. Udriet, and so home. Yet the doctor deliberately chose the longer route. He admits it frankly. He did not wish to pass the house of the dead—an evil, vindictive, almost frightened," he said, "though exactly of what it could not tell. I came out of La Poste into the night and trembling. It was the most unaccountable sensation I have ever known. Rather than pass the door of that woman's house I'd have walked a mile."

So he went home by a roundabout way of perhaps fifteen minutes' duration. The village was utterly deserted, and the night air swept about him with the scent of early spring from the surrounding forests. In his mind however, he still saw his friend's changed face and heard the whispered words as they were uttered. "You passed me by. Now I'm out I shan't pass you by."

And do what he might he could not dismiss them from his mind. Time with the echo of his feet on the hard road.

A little more than half-way his path joined the main street of the village, and then turned to the right, and ran between low stone walls to Michaud's house. Beyond the walls were vineyards, with numbers of bare sticks already planted in the earth.

And it was here, as he passed the fountain, that he first heard a noise that sent the blood tingling up about his ears. The mountain water splashed here and the water made a steady fall, but what he heard had nothing to do with that. It was the sound of small feet pattering along the dusty shelf of the houses.

Something was following him. "It's a dog," he said, yet at the same time he knew quite well it was not a dog. It was on two feet, not on four. Fear dropped cold and wet over his face.

The road slopes the whole way to where the Michaud house stands isolated from the rest of the village among the vineyards, and Dr. Blane quickened his pace against a run. He fought the excuse that he was cold, though he was perfectly aware that the cold he felt was not the common cold of night.

In a time he reached the desire to look round, but before he was half way down the hill the moon emerged from the clouds, and there, with a sudden movement as though expected to be at—and from behind—stopped short and turned.

The village street in the pale starry moonlight was empty. Black shadows lined its sides, but empty, pierced the sky; far above gleamed the crystal snows on the flanks of Mont Blanche, and the great mountain of Blaidre with its dark army of pines stood sentinel over the valley. But there all. Nothing moved. But from the spaces of the open moon lit road rose behind him current the sound of light pattering. The steps still followed him.

The way that creeping fear had begun to master him was beyond all things strange. He pulled himself together with a great effort of will and commanded his legs to walk quietly. He refused to run; he walked. was to admit too horrible a thing. He was not afraid of anything human or real, but undoubtedly he admitted himself afraid of something not of this world. He felt himself all reach of an assault. He recognised with fear and unwarned it. It was a result he at once resolved that the would never no longer suffer the movement of an evil mind with impunity. He would not run. He would not, in the face of the unseen, imaginary, horror of the night, be a coward. He would walk quietly and with dignity to the door of his house, and there [illegible] the door behind him. [illegible] and there [illegible] the door behind him.

But it was not to be. [illegible] the door behind him. [illegible] the door behind him. [illegible] the door behind him